

Congress Needs to Develop Food Safety Legislation that Works for All

July 30, 2009

Mr. Speaker, based upon yesterday's vote on H.R. 2749, the Food Safety Enhancement Act, one would think that the Democrat leadership would say, wait, maybe we have some issues here that need to be taken care of. Maybe we should refer this bill to the Committee on Agriculture and get some of these problems cleaned up. Instead of taking the lesson from yesterday's defeat on this bill on the Suspension Calendar, the Democrat leadership has decided to run this bill through the House under a closed rule with no debate and no amendments.

I would ask: What's the problem with referring this bill to a committee of jurisdiction to make technical, yet necessary, changes? Why not allow an amendment to clean up some of the bill's problems regarding production agriculture and other rural businesses?

All of us want to support a food safety bill. I will say that again: All of us, including me, want to support a food safety bill. I also believe that if the majority would allow a referral to the Committee on Agriculture, this food safety bill would receive wide and bipartisan support. However, the Democrat leadership has taken its "my-way-or-the-highway" approach that leaves those of us from rural America unable to support this legislation.

Yesterday when H.R. 2749 was on suspension, I raised issues that concern farmers and ranchers. The primary concern is an inadequate exemption for grain farmers and livestock producers. True, the bill exempts grain farmers from performance standards and record-keeping from growing and harvesting activities, but it fails to exempt on-farm grain storage and transportation activities. So while I thank the members of the Energy and Commerce Committee for trying to accommodate us, it's still not right and more needs to be done.

Another problem I would like to raise today involves the grain-handling industry, which affects thousands of small grain elevators across the country where farmers deliver their grain. Many of these facilities are already subject to USDA grain inspections. Many are also subject to State and Federal warehouse licensing fees.

However, this bill gives duplication authority to the FDA to do its inspections. It also imposes a one-size-fits-all registration fee for grain-handling facilities large and small. What's the point of the fee? Grain elevators are already subject to licensing fees; so it must be to impose another revenue-raising tax.

A country-of-origin labeling is included in this bill, but we don't need country-of-origin labeling for grain. Unlike meat, grain is a fungible product, and while it's possible, although difficult, to identify a steak, giving identity to tiny individual kernels of grain, which are blended with billions of other tiny kernels of grain, is next to impossible.

I would like to point out that of the many food safety concerns Members and their constituents have raised, I have yet to hear a complaint about the grain industry. This is because we already have a system that works. Instead of strengthening that system, this bill overlays another system of unnecessary bureaucracy.

Mr. Speaker, I oppose the rule and I oppose the bill and would ask once again that the Committee on Agriculture utilize its jurisdiction to correct the flaws so that all of us can vote "yes."